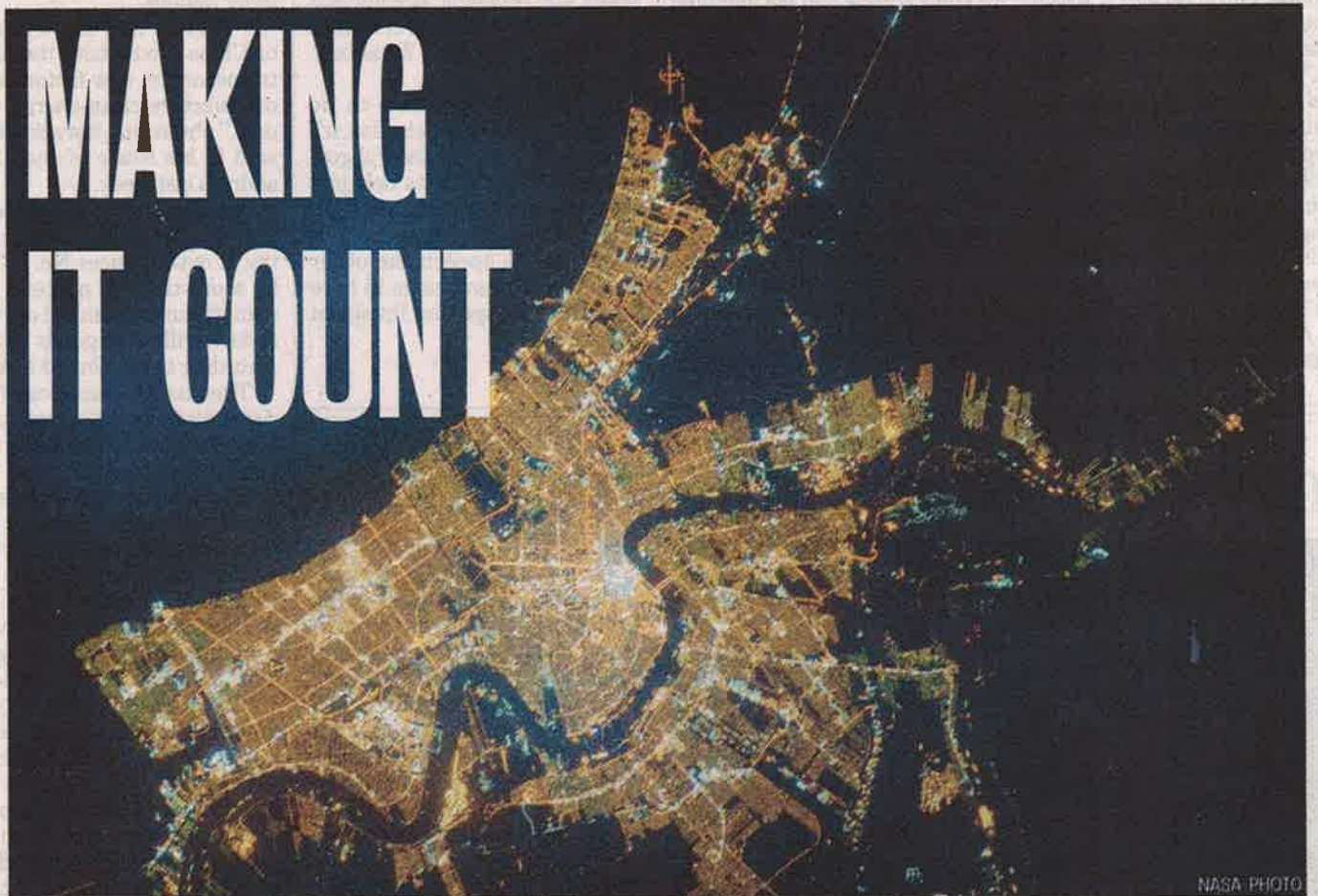


Census figures to be released this week will determine the shape of things to come

MAKING IT COUNT



The block-by-block 2010 population tallies will not only provide authoritative data on New Orleans' post-storm recovery, they will be key to determining how much federal money the area will receive and to the redrawing of electoral boundaries.

By Michelle Krupa
Staff writer

TP JAN 31 2011

For political leaders, demographers and others keeping close tabs on the Hurricane Katrina recovery, this week will finally bring the answer to perhaps the most fundamental question hanging over the New Orleans area since the long slog back from the storm began: How many people actually live here?

While experts have tried to pin down the number using a variety of data — building permits, active U.S. post office addresses, birth and death rates, school enrollment, electricity usage and other measures — the gold standard remains the block-by-block 2010 Census population tallies that are set for release this week.

The results finally will provide a definitive picture of how the region has changed since it was virtually emptied by the disaster.

In addition to the numbers of adults and children, the data will break down the population to the city block, as well as by race and ethnicity. Information on household size and the relationships

among people who live under the same roof will roll out in coming months.

The figures will be key to determining how \$400 billion in federal money gets distributed nationwide for the next 10 years. The numbers also will guide the redrawing of electoral boundaries for offices ranging from local school boards to Congress.

Given the stakes, the results could prompt howls of protest — and possibly legal action — if the numbers come in lower than the population estimates that the Census Bureau has released annually since the storm. In several of those years, officials in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes have contested initial estimates, ultimately convincing the census to boost them.

With Louisiana one of just four states slated to receive census data this week, the national news media is likely to focus on the New Orleans area, albeit briefly, to gauge how the region has rebounded.

"I think we should brace ourselves for potentially sobering news," said Richard Campanella, a Tulane University geographer. "Here, we've been pumping up

ESTIMATE DISPUTES

Since Katrina, officials in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes have persuaded the U.S. Census Bureau to increase their population estimates.

■ Original ■ Revised ■ Change

ORLEANS PARISH

2007	239,124	288,113	+20%
2008	311,853	336,644	+8%

JEFFERSON PARISH

2007	423,520	440,399	+4%
2008	436,181	444,655	+2%

ST. BERNARD PARISH

2007	19,826	33,439	+69%
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau

See CENSUS, A-3

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"I think we should brace ourselves for potentially sobering news."

RICHARD CAMPANELLA, A TULANE UNIVERSITY GEOGRAPHER

Local officials have long been wary of census

CENSUS, from A-1

expectations. Falling short of expectations could produce a national news narrative that maybe won't be deserved, or at least could have been avoided."

As for getting the census to reconsider its 2010 count, a person-by-person tally mandated by the Constitution, experts say it's not nearly as simple as convincing the agency to revise a yearly estimate.

Making the case even tougher are the extraordinary measures that the bureau took to ensure an accurate count in the hardest-hit areas, including hand-delivering questionnaires. The new Republican majority in the U.S. House also could be hurdle, as GOP lawmakers tend to oppose expanding the scope of the census; chronically undercounted residents tend to vote for Democrats.

In the end, local leaders will probably have to live with the numbers they get, although some are girding for a fight. In the meantime, the air-tight census bureaucracy has kept any results from leaking out in advance. Even in places that didn't experience an epic population upheaval, the wait can be exasperating.

"Every city right now is just like New Orleans: biting their nails, wondering what the number is going to be," said Allison Plyer of the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, which has tracked the city's repopulation using postal records and helped the city prepare its challenges of annual estimates.

"The census estimates always diverge from the census counts, anywhere from a very small percentage to 10 percent or more," she said. "New Orleans had an unprecedented, catastrophic population displacement, which in my opinion inserts more uncertainty around the population. But the only thing we're certain about is how large the uncertainty is."

The population of New Orleans, which until Katrina was easily the state's largest city, is perhaps the most eagerly awaited statistic. The growth rate of flood-ravaged St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes also will be of keen interest, as will that of Jefferson Parish, considered the state's most populous parish since 2007, according to estimates.

And in St. Charles, St. John the Baptist and St. Tammany parishes, residents finally will learn whether post-Katrina population increases have taken root as permanent, long-term growth.

Fears in N.O., St. Bernard

Despite the unprecedented, costly effort by the federal government to get an accurate count in hurricane-ravaged areas, local officials long have been wary of the 2010 census.

Former Mayor Ray Nagin encouraged Katrina victims still living elsewhere — and longing to return — to record New Orleans as their home, although officials said the advice violated federal policy.

In St. Bernard, Parish President Craig Taffaro urged



DAVID GRUNFELD / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Flood-ravaged areas such as Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish, seen November 2008, are expected to attract the most attention when the U.S. Census bureau releases its population data for Louisiana. The results will provide a definitive picture of how the region has changed.

residents still rebuilding to spend the night with friends or relatives in the parish on the eve of the official census day so their hosts could honestly answer the key population question: "How many people were living or staying in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2010?"

In the end, fewer than 50 percent of households that received forms in Orleans and St. Bernard parishes returned them, a low rate that likely owed to the huge number of vacant homes there.

Response rates were higher elsewhere, with more than three-quarters of households in Jefferson and St. Tammany parishes mailing back the questionnaires, a rate on par with the national average.

Cautious optimism

Local officials last week expressed cautious optimism that the count will be accurate.

New Orleans Deputy Mayor Emily Sneed Arata said City Hall's top concern is that the tally will undercut the actual population, which is key to federal money — \$1,500 per resident, she estimated — for such programs as homeless assistance, Medicaid, subsidized meals at school and community block grants.

If the census appears to come up short, however, New Orleans officials aren't likely to

contest it, Arata said, "because it doesn't yield results." They instead would prepare for the next chance to challenge population estimates in 2012.

Arata downplayed the idea that a low count could deal a psychological blow to the recovery. "I think that people are going to judge our recovery based on what's going on the ground," she said, referring to ongoing capital projects from the restoration of pools and playgrounds to the planned expansion of the streetcar line.

Taffaro, meanwhile, described the census methodology as "flawed," though he did not elaborate. He added that St. Bernard officials won't simply accept a number they think shortchanges the true population.

"We know how many people we have; it's a matter of proving it

to the Census Bureau," he said in an e-mail message. "It becomes an exercise in bureaucracy."

In Jefferson Parish, where population estimates have not dropped precipitously since Katrina and census response rates were high, Parish President John Young said he's "not overly worried about an undercount."

Young added, however, that his government has contracts with GCR & Associates, a local consulting firm that helped Jefferson and New Orleans prepare their 2007 and 2008 population challenges.

"We're prepared if we have to do that," Young said.

Appeals process

Contesting the decennial numbers is not impossible. Mayors, parish presidents or the governor can appeal through

an administrative process that allows for residents to be added if officials can prove that "processing errors" caused a miscount.

Nearly 1,200 jurisdictions used the process in 2000, with their appeals resulting in a net increase of 2,700 people, or about 2.3 people per jurisdiction, according to the agency.

Another option is a special census, which requires a city or parish to organize — and pay for — a brand-new census, including drafting questionnaires, canvassing addresses, hiring workers and collecting forms, following the strict rules of a decennial count.

A coalition of national and local civil rights groups in 2009 called on Congress to authorize and finance a special census of Gulf Coast communities in 2012 or 2013 that would be

used to update the 2010 count to reflect the continuing return of residents. The request as gone nowhere.

If either of those options were successful, the Census Bureau would officially alter the 2010 tally for use in funding formulas, but not for reapportionment.

Alfred "Butch" Speer, clerk of the state House of Representatives, said that given the uncertainty about the census results in southeast Louisiana, he's been reviewing the handful of federal lawsuits filed by jurisdictions claiming undercounts.

"They've all lost. Nobody has been successful," he said. "It's just a very steep mountain for a plaintiff to climb."

Were a Louisiana parish or city to convince a judge to enjoin the 2010 numbers, the state's effort to redraw state political subdivisions, including legislative districts, could be thrown into turmoil, Speer said. The process must be complete before the fall elections.

"We could get caught in a terrible conundrum," he said. "If we can't use the census, then we can't run elections on the current districts. Given the budget situation and what a statewide election costs, that would be a horrible solution for the state."

'Day of reckoning'

GCR President Greg Rigamer said the low response rates in hard-hit parishes causes him "great concern about an undercount."

That said, unless block-by-block data diverge substantially from his own research, Rigamer suggested officials take what they get.

"Everybody's going to want a higher number," he said. "But if the numbers pass the reasonable test, we should embrace them."

It's important for the region — and New Orleans in particular — to know the real population so officials can properly tackle policy issues such as crime, education and economic development, said Mark VanLandingham, a Tulane demographer who sees some of the higher estimates as wishful thinking.

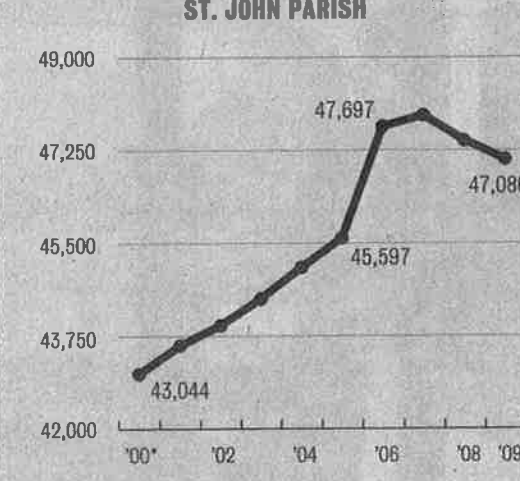
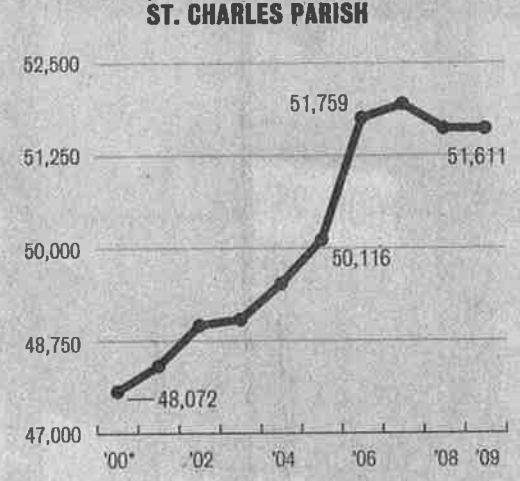
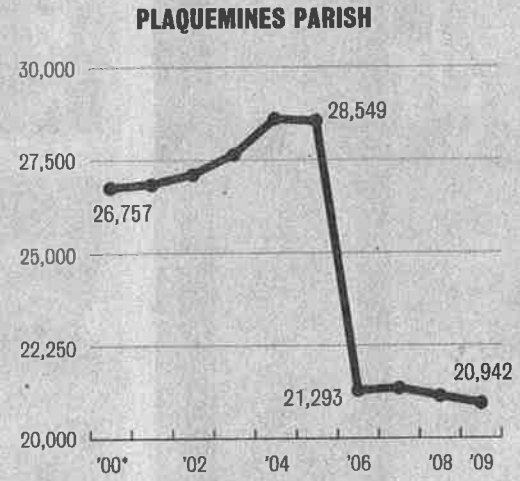
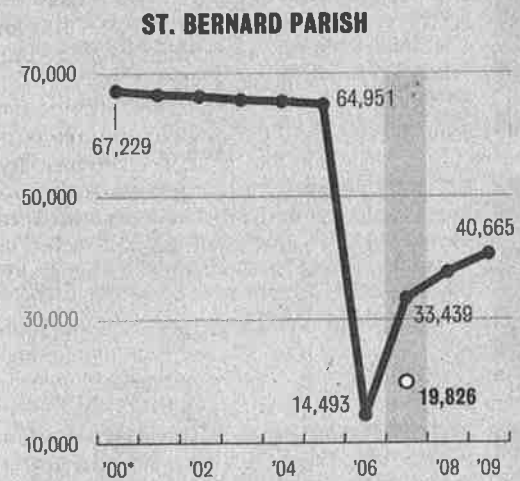
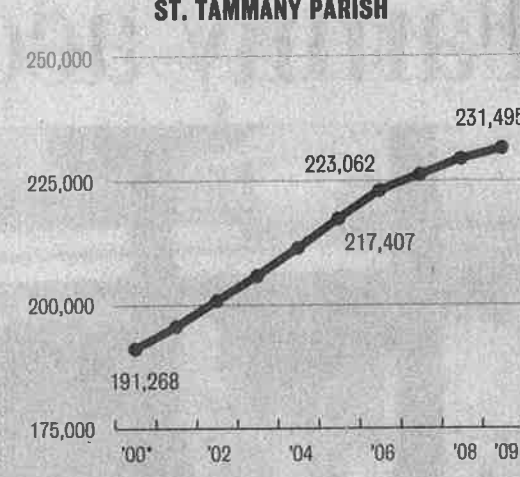
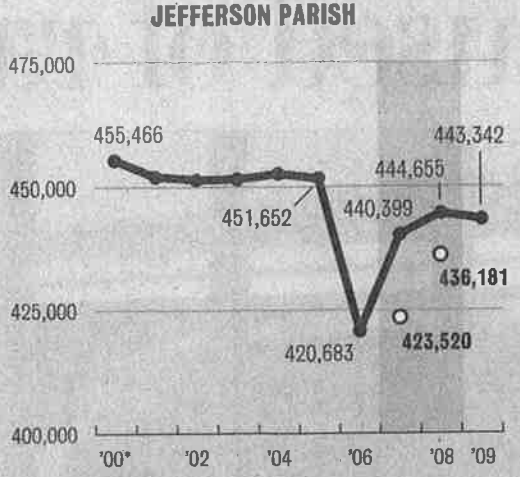
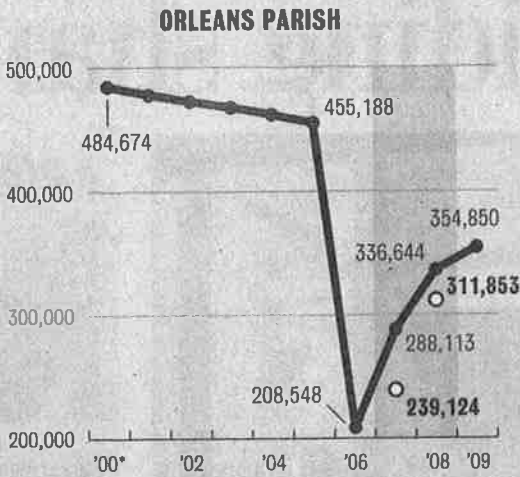
"If the Census Bureau and the federal government have been cutting us a break, a day of reckoning is going to come, and I think that day of reckoning is here," he said. "We need to have the best count that science can give us, and this count is going to be as good as it can be. They pulled out all of the stops because they wanted to get it right."

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POPULATION TRACKING

Since Hurricane Katrina, officials in Orleans, Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes have persuaded the U.S. Census Bureau to increase their population estimates. Persuading the federal agency to change the 2010 head count could be a tougher challenge.

KEY:
— Census estimate ○ Challenged estimate
*2000 is actual census number



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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